

# Smart Community Governance from an Empowerment Perspective: A Case Study of the Guidong Community Residents' Innovation Lab Empowerment Project

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## Abstract

With the acceleration of urbanization and the deepening of grassroots democratization, residents' demands for participation in and decision-making regarding community public affairs are increasing. However, traditional community consultation and deliberation methods often suffer from problems such as monotonous forms, low participation, and low decision-making efficiency, making it difficult to meet the diverse needs of residents in the process of community governance, while also lacking the professional participation of social workers. This study takes the Chengdu Guidong Community Resident Innovation Lab Empowerment Program as an example to explore how social workers can play a role in trustworthy community governance. As an innovative practice of grassroots governance in Chengdu, trustworthy community governance, by introducing the concept of trust, enables the community to build a sustainable development relationship of mutual benefit, win-win cooperation, mutual assistance, and mutual trust among all stakeholders, reducing trust deficiencies, lowering communication and collaboration costs, and improving the effectiveness of grassroots governance through co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits.

## Keywords

Social Worker; Community Work; Empowerment; Smart Community.

## 1. Introduction

With the professionalization and standardization of social work at the grassroots level, the participation of social workers in community governance and the provision of community services have received high attention and expectations [1]. However, in suburban communities, most residents lack sufficient understanding of community public affairs and have limited capacity to participate in consultation and deliberation under strong administrative management, often leading to implementation difficulties for social workers. Simultaneously, communication and collaboration among community governance entities also face obstacles, making it difficult to effectively implement decisions. Therefore, community empowerment, or community re-empowerment, as a social work concept, has been introduced to China and is gradually becoming one of the methods in Chinese community social work practice [2].

## 2. Study Purpose

This study, taking the Guidong Community Residents' Innovation Lab Empowerment Plan as an example, aims to explore a "1+5+7" governance framework. This framework uses a Party building co-construction platform as the political and organizational core, and seven resident innovation labs as functional carriers and practical platforms. Through systematic empowerment intervention and mechanism construction, it aims to incubate and cultivate

resident self-organized teams with independent operational capabilities. Simultaneously, it promotes the transformation of community governance from "platform building" to "functional revitalization," and from "project execution" to "subject cultivation," ultimately constructing a new ecosystem of community trust-based co-governance characterized by "Party building leadership-resident dominance-professional support-multi-party collaboration." This provides a solution for the organic renewal of old communities by "revitalizing carriers, cultivating subjects, and innovating mechanisms."

### 3. Literature Review

Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling community residents to take control of the factors and decisions that affect their lives[3]. The concept of community empowerment originated in the 1980s. The term derives from the word "empowerment," which itself originates from the field of community psychology. Rappaport argued that empowerment can be viewed as a process or mechanism through which individuals, organizations, and communities gain control over their own lives[4][5]. In 1987, Rappaport further proposed that empowerment "involves both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights"[6]. At the community level, empowerment places greater emphasis on accessible community resources, social and political change, and the connections between community organizations[7]. In the early 21st century, the concept of community empowerment saw further development. Anckerman et al. (2005) noted that the key principles of community empowerment include collective reflection, social participation and political dialogue, as well as outcomes such as access to adequate resources to promote community well-being and social justice[8].

## 4. The Implementation of Project

### 4.1. The Introduction of Guidong Community

Guidong Community is a residential community under the jurisdiction of Guihu Subdistrict, Xindu District, Chengdu, Sichuan Province. It was established in 2020 through the merger of the former Donghuanlu Community and Guidonglu Community. The community is bounded by Rongdu Avenue to the east, Nanmen River to the south, Shengyuting Lane to the west, and Guidong East Road to the north. It encompasses 41 residential courtyards as well as commercial, medical, cultural, and sports facilities.

Located in the old urban area of the city, Guidong Community took shape in the 1980s and 1990s, covering an area of approximately 4.7 square kilometers. It serves over 17,000 residents, among whom nearly 30% (more than 3,200 individuals) are aged 60 or above, including 420 people aged 80 or older. The community also includes special-needs groups such as 17 households (18 individuals) receiving subsistence allowances, 196 individuals with disabilities (including 66 with severe disabilities), 848 veterans and entitled beneficiaries (including 56 key entitled beneficiaries), and over 1,600 children (among whom 5 are left-behind children)[9].

### 4.2. Research Method

At this stage, a combination of survey methods and field research is employed to establish a scientific and objective project baseline and to build consensus among diverse stakeholders. The Xindu Xiaocao Public Welfare Organization has been conducting community governance projects in Guidong Community for a long time. Led by social workers from the Xiaocao Public Welfare Service Center, the organization began conducting visits and research in Guidong in 2024.

The survey method is a research approach that indirectly gathers information about the subjects of study through various channels. While generally easy to administer, the reliability of survey results can often be affected by issues such as respondents' inaccurate memory during the process. Field research, also known as on-site research, refers to the method of collecting data through observation, interviews, and experiments in real, natural social environments. This approach is used to explore objective psychological patterns that are close to nature and reality.

This investigation adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative research to promote multi-stakeholder participation. It involves the execution of no fewer than 200 structured questionnaires, supplemented by key informant interviews. This comprehensive approach is designed to map community governance needs, residents' willingness to participate, and potential key resources. The findings will culminate in a Community Governance Needs and Resources Report, providing a basis for targeted project interventions. Following the preliminary research, Guidong Community held a project kick-off meeting, inviting representatives from the subdistrict office, the community Party committee, cooperative organizations, and residents. During the meeting, project promotional materials were distributed to inform community residents about the project's content.

### **4.3. Improving the Empowerment in Community by Social Workers**

The core of this stage is to cultivate endogenous governance entities within the community. The project is organized by social workers and plays a radiating role, contributing to the systematic capacity building for community governance in Guidong Community. The Resident Innovation Laboratory Empowerment Project itself is a professional team composed of social workers. Among them, the project leader holds a certificate for Intermediate Social Worker, and three team members hold certificates for Assistant Social Workers. Additionally, two external social work supervisors are engaged to provide regular on-site guidance monthly, and social work experts are invited on multiple occasions to deliver lectures on social work knowledge. The governance platform in Guidong Community has formed a network integrating professional social workers, community maps, resident activities, and deliberation scenarios.

Driven by the professional expertise of social workers, Guidong Community has successfully established a governance-oriented team. Through three channels-"open recruitment, organizational recommendation, and individual self-recommendation"-five "core self-organizations of the Resident Innovation Laboratory" were selected and formed. An inaugural meeting was held to review and adopt organizational regulations, clarify roles and responsibilities, achieving a key transition from individual participation to institutionalized entities.

### **4.4. Creating Progressive Empowerment Workshops**

In the implementation of the community empowerment plan, alongside the establishment of the Resident Innovation Lab, Guidong Community also conducted a series of progressive empowerment workshops led by social workers. These workshops, as a key component of community education, are centered around the development of seven core lab functions.

1) Collaborative Governance Workshop: Four workshops on the "Open Space Technology" methodology were held to train participants in meeting facilitation rules, issue identification, and consensus-building techniques.

2) Integrity Governance Workshop: Four practical training sessions on "Transparent Budgeting and Project Oversight" were conducted, featuring hands-on simulation and audit exercises using actual community accounts.

3) Green & Healthy Living Workshop: Three skill-building workshops on "Eco-enzyme Production and Community Promotion" were organized, guiding participants from theory to product creation and ultimately to actionable initiatives.

4) Cultural Innovation Workshop: Two workshops on "Uncovering Community Cultural DNA and Designing Cultural & Creative Products" were held.

5) Social Work Practice Workshop: Two workshops on "Social Work and Community Governance" were conducted, applying professional social work methodologies to enhance residents' capabilities in community service and mobilization.

6) Grassroots Governance Seminar: One seminar on grassroots governance was organized, inviting relevant experts to discuss key actors in grassroots governance. The event brought together scholars, experienced practitioners, and community leaders to explore, within the integrity governance framework, how to clearly define, effectively cultivate, and motivate diverse governance entities (especially resident self-organizations), clarify their rights, responsibilities, boundaries, collaborative relationships, and driving mechanisms, ultimately fostering a sustainable co-governance model characterized by "Party leadership, resident initiative, professional support, and multi-stakeholder collaboration."

All empowerment workshops in Guidong Community were organized by social workers from the third-party organization, Xiaocao Public Service Center, ensuring full transparency throughout the process. The project adheres to the principle of publicly displaying the Resident Innovation Lab's budget to all residents, upholding the values of openness, fairness, and justice in community governance. For example, the community uses replaceable display boards to create a dedicated section showcasing the transparent budgets of self-organizations. This allows members of these organizations and other residents to participate in participatory budgeting for service funds, emphasizing resident involvement in the entire process and focusing on governance rather than mere management.

## 5. Project Results

### 5.1. Rebuilding Resident Trust and Fostering Effective Community Participation

Through the earlier integrity-based community governance initiatives and the latest Resident Innovation Empowerment Plan, the overall landscape of Guidong Community has been rapidly transforming. Neighborhood relationships have warmed significantly, giving rise to a large number of dedicated residents enthusiastic about contributing to community public affairs. They actively engage in neighborhood activities, assistance for those in need, micro-renewal projects in residential compounds, and other communal matters. Taking Xiangliyuan Residential Complex as an example, its volunteer service team has now grown to over 50 members, with more than 10 various community groups. Through the joint efforts of social workers, residents, volunteers, and others, collective brainstorming and collaboration have been fostered, promoting a virtuous cycle in community development.

Community empowerment is a key driver for cultivating a culture of civility and activating self-governance momentum. Under the organization and guidance of social workers, integrity-based community governance has gradually taken root in people's hearts. At the Guidong Community Governance Recognition Ceremony held in late November 2025, several residents shared the transformative journeys of their own compounds. They vividly recounted the shift from "disorganized environments and poor communication" to "comprehensive facilities and harmonious neighborhoods," detailing improvements in infrastructure, neighborly relations, and self-governance mechanisms.

## 5.2. The Innovative Role of Social Workers in Governance Mechanisms

Guided by theories of community empowerment, Guidong Community in Xindu District, Chengdu, has explored a governance path characterized by Party leadership, social work organization, and resident-led participation. The "Resident Innovation Laboratory" Empowerment Plan elevates trust-based community governance from the residential complex level to the community level, providing social workers with a broader platform to leverage their expertise. The role of social workers in governance is not to do things for residents, but to accompany them in their growth; not to provide answers, but to help build a stage for residents to find answers themselves. The essence of governance is not management, but awakening; not control, but empowerment.

The Resident Innovation Laboratory Empowerment Plan aims to develop a replicable model of grassroots democratic practice. It seeks to establish a clear list of rights and responsibilities for social workers' intervention in governance, promote institutional safeguards at the policy and legal levels, incorporate integrity governance into grassroots governance regulations, and even establish a dedicated community governance fund. In the future, this project will continue to practice integrity governance in broader fields such as community environmental protection, health services, and cultural development.

## 6. Conclusion

In recent years, while pursuing rapid urbanization, my country has also prioritized urban community governance, with Xindu District of Chengdu City placing particular emphasis on the professional role of social work in grassroots community governance. This paper explores the implementation process and effects of the empowerment plan of the Guidong Community Innovation Laboratory in Xindu District, Chengdu City, from an empowerment perspective. It studies how social workers can promote the incubation of community organizations and empower community workshops; discusses how social workers in Xindu District have become an important component of community governance projects; and explores the innovative role of social workers at the community level. Furthermore, it finds that under the Xinyi Community Governance Model, the forms, approaches, and mechanisms of social worker participation have been further innovated. This case study can provide valuable reference for future professional empowerment of social workers and their participation in innovative community governance practices in my country.

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